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ABSTRACT

This study explored how societal changes have rendered contemporary midlife women different from those who have preceded them. Subjects were female college graduates who were mailed a demographic survey, the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, and the Salamon-Conte Life Satisfaction Scale. Subjects were divided into three artificially created groups. Group one (ages 34 to 42) consisted of 326 baby boom midlife women. Group two (ages 43 to 48) consisted of 292 pre-baby boom mid-life women. Group three (ages 49 to 55) consisted of 344 older pre-baby boom women. Baby boom women had actually reached their high aspirations and were comparable or ahead of their older counterparts in occupational status and household income. The vast majority of baby boom midlife women were choosing marriage and were continuing to bear children. The difference appeared to be that marriage and childbearing occurred later in life. Despite the societal changes, traditional values, in the main, appeared to be the most preferred options for the women in this study. Women who reported that they were married, or living with someone, demonstrated lower levels of anxiety and higher life satisfaction. The results of the study revealed that the effects of socialization, rather than age, yield major significant variables influencing a feeling of well being in both cohorts of midlife women. (Contains 32 references and 4 tables.) (ABL)

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MIDLIFE "BABY BOOM" WOMEN COMPARED TO THEIR OLDER COUNTERPARTS IN MIDLIFE

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Running Head: Midlife Baby Boom Women

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Abstract

A stratified random sample of midlife "baby boom" women, aged 35 to 42, was compared to a group of older midlife women, aged 43 to 55. The sample consisted of 992 women, who were graduated between the years of 1975 and 1955, from a large university in Southern California. Measures of anxiety and life satisfaction were conducted on each year group, and on ten year age groups. This served to control for the effect of age, and was helpful in explaining whether the differences between the groups were age related or whether they occurred because of socialization. The "baby boom" cohort of women, born after January 1, 1946, have only recently entered the ranks of midlife. They have been recognized as unique and less traditional than their older colleagues with regard to sexual freedom, career choices, and educational opportunities. Similarities and differences were found between the two groups of women. But clearly, the results in this study reveal that the effects of socialization, rather than age, yield the major significant variables influencing a feeling of well being in both cohorts of midlife women.

Midlife "Baby Boom" Women Compared To Their Older Counterparts in Midlife

Introduction and Background of the Problem

This study explores how societal changes have rendered contemporary midlife women different from those who have preceded them. Many negative societal myths have been perpetuated because of a dearth of empirical study on women in this stage in life. To date, there is no psychology, sociology, real history, or coherent social science theory about women of any age. Previous studies reflected mainly on dysfunctional women, based on now mitigated Freudian theory (Freud, 1933), and reflected experiences, perceptions of men (Duffy, 1985; Bowles & Klein, 1983). Further, Gerber, Wolff, Klores & Brown (1989) report that there were virtually no scholarly books or studies in gerontology until the early 1980s. As a consequence, we have no real proven patterns on how individuals make the transition through the various stages in midlife. Pre-midlife baby boomers differ from early and late midlife baby boomers, and and all exhibit differences when compared to pre-baby boom midlife women. The question before us is how will these various cohorts will look as they venture into old age.

"Baby Boom Women" were born following January 1, 1946, and only recently entering the ranks of midlife. These individuals have been recognized by many contemporary

researchers, including Jones (1981) and Easterlin (1980) as being unique, more liberal, and less conforming than women born a generation earlier. These women had more career and educational opportunities, later marriage, and sexual freedom than those who preceded them (Kessler-Harris, 1982). Some in the "baby boom" cohort were among the first to experience the benefits of equal opportunity for women resulting from the women's and civil rights' movements. They were socialized during an era of affluence, television, sexual revolution, the proliferation of illegal drug use, and the Vietnam protests in which national self doubt was rampant (Jones, 1981).

Pre "Baby Boom Women" (aged 43-55) were socialized during entirely different circumstances. Some of them experienced the Great Depression and World War II and were, for the most part, raised with the traditional values of home and family. They experienced fewer opportunities in education and in the male dominated professions such as medicine, law, and business (Kessler-Harris, 1982). These older women came of age in a period in which patriotism and national consensus flourished. Traditional values have been explicated as revolving around the family, love of country, competition, conformity, and respect for authority (Gribbon, 1981). When earlier studies on midlife were conducted in the 1950s and 1960s, women did not generally participate in roles

outside the home. Ehrenreich (1983) reported that men in those years were perceived as breadwinners while most women were expected to follow the traditional patterns of early marriage, child bearing, and child rearing.

Theoretical Discussion

The actual age of midlife varies according to cultural and other factors, which designate midlife dependent on the theories set forth by disparate researchers. Erikson (1950) defines the middle years in terms of one of his eight phases in the life cycle in which specific requisites are necessary in order to progress through the transition in an adaptive manner. Gould (1978) speaks of an inner-directedness, or a focus on self, which designates midlife and assigns these events to the fortieth decade. Jung (1961), whose influence is found in Gould's work, suggests a feeling of inner uncertainty prevails during an individual's mid to late thirties. Few of these theorists would have the foresight to project the effects of the societal changes on the lives of contemporary women.

Exploration of cohort theory is relevant so that the "baby boom" and pre "baby boom" women may be compared to enhance our understanding of adult midlife development and transition. A cohort is a group of people born during the same or several-year period who share similar experiences over time (Jones, 1981). In this study the baby boom cohort

of women who were born between 1946 and 1953 were compared to older midlife women born between 1933 and 1945. Cohort differences between these women have not been fully explored. Jennings and Niemi (1981) describe a birth cohort as one that shares experience under somewhat similar circumstances. This creates a generational effect in which the individuals born during a similar time frame go through certain life adventures together. These life events take place at pivotal and impressionable times during early developmental phases at a point before adulthood. It is logical to expect to find differences in attitudes between the younger and older cohorts of midlife women. Further, it is recognized that it is difficult to control for an overlapping or "coat-tailing" effect. Understanding the effect of change caused by aging is another challenge in any research involving midlife women in the aggregate. One might theorize that the shared experiences of social change and upheaval that occurred during similar pivotal times in the lives of the members of the cohort groups may be the explanation for "overlapping" in attitudes and feelings. It may become evident through the results of this and future studies that shared experiences can affect attitudinal changes in life phases other than pre-adulthood. This study addresses the issue of understanding societal change and its effects, further enhancing a discussion of adult midlife development. Because of the

sheer numbers and the power of the 75 million strong cohort of "baby boomers" including both men and women (Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1985; Population Rererence Bureau, 1980), what has happened to this cohort may impact the future of midlife women.

Problem

The dramatic increase in the number of contemporary women between the ages of 35 and 44 has far reaching implications. This cohort is the largest in the population today and is rapidly advancing into middle age with the average age for all Americans now reported to be just over age 30 (Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1985). Silverstone and Hyman (1978) refer to the midlife generation as the "sandwich generation," those in between the younger generation on one side and the elder generation on the other. Furthermore, Silverstone concludes there is a lack of knowledge because empirical studies on midlife are negligible. Davis (1981) reports that only recently have the middle years been recognized as pivotal, encompassing numerous life transitions, and **not** uneventful as had been previously believed. Models and norms of behavior for this life transition are slowly emerging for midlife women who are 45 and older. However, the newest cohort of midlife women may be quite divergent in light of how they were socialized and how they accepted new roles and adjustments to societal

norms. The most recent participants in the midlife transition may find themselves ambivalent with the possibility of being in high states of anxiety because of their non-traditional lifestyles, which include postponement of marriage and child bearing, and working in previously male-dominated spheres. As a result of the ambivalence and anxiety that may be present, it is significant to compare the "baby boom" group of midlife women to an older sample of midlife women. For contemporary women who can expect a life span well into their eighties, this stage in life will have great importance (Birren, Kinney, Schaie & Woodruff, 1981; Gerber et al., 1989).

Purpose of the Study

Contemporary feminist writers deny that women are highly anxious and show deviant behavior (Chodorow, 1978; Keohane, Rosaldo & Gelpi, 1981). Investigating evolving behavioral norms will enable us to determine whether the trend toward refuting the earlier studies portraying midlife women in a negative light holds for the baby boomers. They have reportedly experienced self-fulfillment and have higher levels of life satisfaction than their older cohorts. In this study additional stress and anxiety due to the multiple societal roles that baby boomers have adopted has **not** been in evidence.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is within the parameters of the psychosocial and developmental aspects of the midlife transition. Some of the major issues identified are:

1. The potential of midlife women is only minimally recognized by society (Gerber et al. 1989).

2. Negative societal feelings can intensify fear of aging, health problems, and menopause (Boston Women's Health Book Collective, 1985).

3. Women in midlife experience a generational pull in which children are making demands on one hand and aged parents are seeking assistance at the other (Silverstone & Hyman 1982; Light, 1988).

4. The divorce rate for midlife marriages has increased dramatically. In midlife women, role transitions caused by divorce or widowhood occur; these are often accompanied by crises, conflict, and confusion (Schlossberg and Entine, 1977). Because of the high divorce rates, multiple marriages are foreseen (Naisbitt, 1982). In addition, the emergence of blended families and step-parents and grandparents changing the concept of family (Gerber, 1989).

5. There have been innumerable studies of children and the elderly, but few noteworthy empirical studies of the midlife transition, especially of women, have been undertaken. These studies are slowly emerging, the Yale

Midlife study on menopause is ongoing and noteworthy (Sarrel, 1991). Another noteworthy study by McKinlay and McKinlay (1986) investigated causes of stress during the menopause. The baby boom generation is not specifically mentioned in either of the above, probably because this cohort is only initially entering the perimenopausal period.

6. As a group, those in the middle years are inherently different to those in previous generations who passed through this transition. This present group is more socially aware, well educated, and more affluent than those who came before them. This more articulate cohort will demand and receive increased services and will probably work longer and be more involved in social action than ever before (Cohen & Gans, 1978; Gerber, et. al., 1989). Many will pursue life-long learning and activities that are stimulating and meaningful. Many will have changing and varied careers. Due to the lengthening of the life-span and greater longevity, it is projected that there will be an increase in multigenerational families with a resultant growth in family responsibility and greater stress for the generation in the middle. New patterns will emerge as old children take care of older parents.

7. High anxiety levels and stress may not be present in midlife women as previously thought.

Treatment of the Data and Response Rate

The data source in this study is the response from a mailed packet that contained a demographic survey based on the research questions generated from the conceptual framework. Also included in the packet were the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (Spielberger, 1983) and the Salamon-Conte Life Satisfaction Scale (1984). These well respected measures of anxiety and life satisfaction are pre-coded and quantified and have been pre-tested for reliability and validity.

The parameters of the study were the female graduates of a Southern California University who were born between 1933 and 1953. The sample encompassed midlife women from the Baby Boom generation and those who preceded them. For purposes of analysis, the sample was divided into three artifically created groups. Age group one (ages 34 to 42) consisted of 326 baby boom midlife women. Age group two (ages 43 to 48) encompassed 292 pre-baby boom mid-midlife women, and Age group three (ages 49 to 55) presented with 344 older pre baby boom midlife women. Because the study is concerned with information about college-educated women, information about non-college-educated women is lacking.

Conclusions

I hypothesized that the younger, midlife baby boom women, because of the multiple roles cast on them, would

display higher levels of anxiety and stress, and lower levels of life satisfaction. This was not evidenced in my study. Observations made by comparing the groups of midlife women have yielded an increased understanding of how younger and older midlife women have experienced life choices, roles, and new behavioral standards. The trend toward refuting earlier studies that were conducted mainly on men are consistent with the findings in this study. Evolution of new societal norms is clearly illustrated in the comparison between the older and younger groups. Although the baby boom women were divergent in many aspects, many similarities to the older cohorts were noted.

Discussion of Similarities and Differences

"Baby boom" women in this study have actually reached their high aspirations and are comparable or ahead of their older counterparts in occupational status and household income.

Insert Table 1 about here

This finding is consistent with that of Gerber et. al. (1989) and is projected to equate with better health and longevity as these cohorts enter old age actively and more affluent than previous cohorts. Old age in the future is seen as less stereotyped with 70 year olds looking and acting like 50 year olds. Early retirement is seen as thing of the past with

many elders working, at least, until they are 70. Because of this enormous baby boom cohort the Social Security system will be severely taxed and may result in reduced and later compensation.

The baby boomers have remained similar to their older cohorts in many areas. Somewhere during the societal changes, this younger cohort has maintained many traditional values with a few accommodations. In this study, the vast majority of baby boom midlife women are choosing marriage and are continuing to bear children. The difference appears to be that marriage and childbearing occur later life and childbearing usually equates with fewer children, a "baby bust," in the baby boom cohort. The above trends were also replicated in the report on the study of the Vietnam Generation (Enduring Legacies, 1987). Despite the societal changes, traditional values, in the main, appear to be the most preferred options for the women in this study.

Correspondingly, women who reported that they were married, or living with someone, demonstrated lower levels of anxiety and higher life satisfaction. Living with someone, rather than the commitment to marriage, has been an acceptable contemporary trend and represents an area of social change consistent with increased sexual freedom.

Insert Table 2 about here

New family models are emerging with increasing options and acceptable patterns as women continue in the work force following childbirth. A higher divorce rate is contributing to blended and non-traditional family patterns. Gerber, et. al.(1989) suggest a neo matriarchy with increasing numbers of women acting as heads of households.

Implications

1. This study replicates previous contemporary literature, which found that midlife women were not highly anxious and dissatisfied with their life situations.

2. Age does not appear to be a factor in determining life satisfaction or high levels of anxiety.

Insert Table 3 about here

3. Social change appears to have impinged on current lifestyles. The "baby boom" women have had more educational benefits, illustrated by the increase in numbers of Masters' and Doctoral degrees held by the "baby boom" women as compared to their older cohorts. This is reflective of the increased opportunities afforded women in education.

Ultimately, this has led to diversity in employment, with women enjoying status in larger numbers than ever before in the formerly male world of business, engineering, and medicine among others. These younger women exercised more sexual freedom, but they remain traditional in their preference for marriage and family, adding the dimension of career and employment with dual career families and income.

Insert Table 4 about here

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4. Additional research needs to be conducted that will address women in similar age groups who are graduates of non-private universities, church-sponsored universities, and women who are not college educated.

5. A new perspective formulated as a result of this study and other contemporary studies on midlife women may impact and contribute to future theories of adult development.

It is suggested that socialization and probably not age is responsible for most of the differences between the groups. A new form of traditionalism is emerging as the baby boomers appear to be adopting a more conservative lifestyle. In their early adulthood the "baby boomers" were projected to be anti-establishmen. Faludi (1991) reflects that societal change is slow with male attitudes still unchanged with

regard to women in non-traditional roles. There is a move away from the feminist movement and a loss of direction for women. As reflected in my study, marriage is the most desired state as many women retreat to the home. They have assumed new norms, commiserate with increased freedom and the sexual revolution. They are searching to make their imprint as they head toward becoming pillars of society. In the aggregate the baby boomers are doing it all, working to realize their potential and self-imposed expectations. Age and maturity are the emerging factors that lead to conforming to structural norms imposed by society. Developmental trends and theories will have to be determined through additional studies on this very important life transition.

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HOUSEHOLD INCOME

	AGE GROUP 1 n=326	AGE GROUP 2 n=292	AGE GROUP 3 n=344
<$25000	5.21% (17)	3.08% (9)	5.23% (18)
$25000-$49999	25.77% (84)	18.49% (54)	22.38% (77)
$50000-$74999	23.31% (76)	22.26% (65)	23.26% (80)
$75000-$99999	14.11% (46)	18.15% (53)	14.83% (51)
$100000-$149999	18.40% (60)	19.18% (56)	19.48% (67)
>$150000	13.19% (43)	18.84% (55)	14.83% (51)

TABLE 1

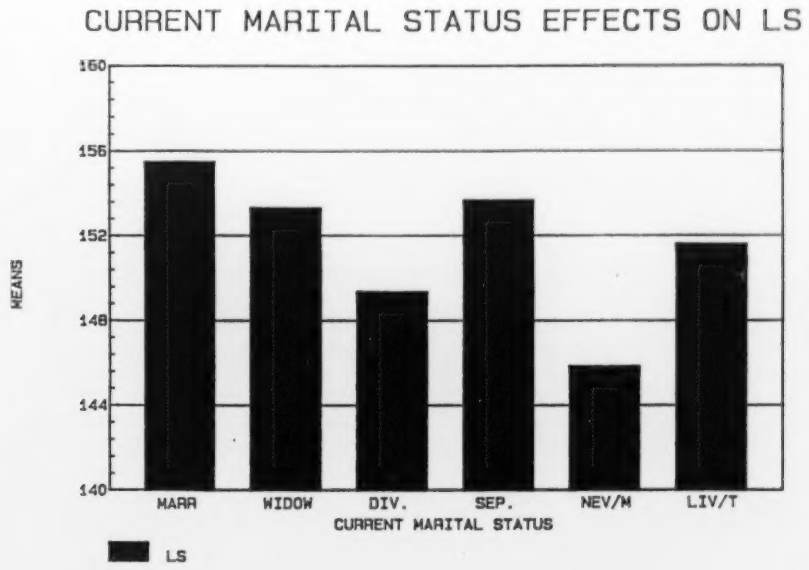
CURRENT MARITAL STATUS EFFECTS ON LS
MEANS
160
156
152
148
144
140
MARR
WIDOW
DIV.
SEP.
NEV/M
LIV/T
CURRENT MARITAL STATUS
LS

TABLE 2

ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE

DEPENDENT VARIABLE ANXS, ANXT, LS

VARIABLE	AGE	N	MEAN	S.D
ANXS	35	18	32.2222	8.1208
	45	46	29.6304	9.1296
	55	37	33.6757	11.7900
ANXT	35	18	33.3889	8.1899
	45	46	30.7174	8.4028
	55	37	34.4324	9.6308
LS	35	18	155.0056	12.6560
	45	46	156.2609	14.9197
	55	37	151.0000	17.4388

LINEAR REGRESSION SLOPE

AGE GROUPS 1, 2, & 3

•NOTE Y AXIS BEGINS AT 110•

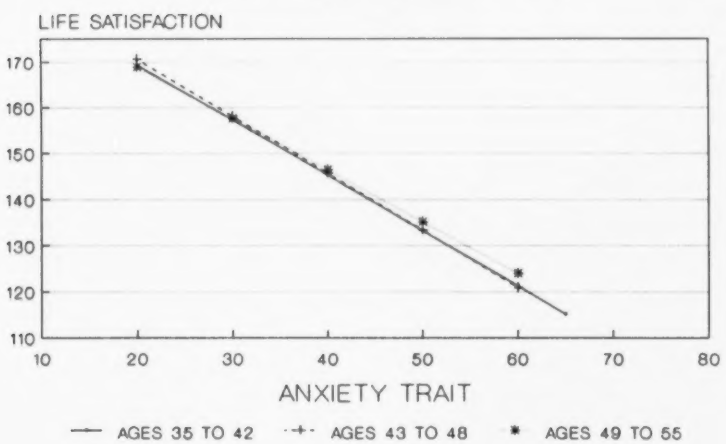

TABLE 3

MAJOR OCCUPATIONS FOR WOMEN IN THE SAMPLE

Occupation	Age Group 1	Age Group 2	Age Group 3
Teaching	24.70%	37.62%	34.45%
Occ./Phys.Therapy	8.13%	3.30%	4.48%
Law	6.63%	1.98%	0.84%
Administration	5.72%	1.98%	1.40%
Dental Hygiene	4.22%	6.27%	13.73%
Marketing	3.01%	3.30%	0.84%
Pres./VP Company	2.71%	1.65%	1.96%
School Admin.	2.11%	4.62%	1.68%
Real Estate	1.81%	3.30%	3.92%
Office Mgr.	1.51%	2.97%	2.51%
Counseling	1.51%	2.97%	1.21%
Secretarial	0.90%	1.98%	1.96%
Nursing	0.60%	0.99%	1.96%
Professor	0.30%	2.97%	0.84%
Retail Mgr.	0.0%	0.33%	1.96%

TABLE 4